



Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching

Department of English Studies, Faculty of Pedagogy and Fine Arts, Adam Mickiewicz University, Kallisz

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Editorial

Why the imagination?

Much of the foreign language learning experience appears to involve the imagination: imagining other ways of life, other ways of viewing the world and talking about it, imagining unfamiliar places, meeting new people there and making new friends. However, as teachers and researchers, we know very little about how learners employ their imaginations to do any of these things nor do we know how to best utilize learners' imaginations to facilitate their language learning. In this special issue of *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, we hope to highlight the growing scholarly interest in the role of imagination in foreign language learning and bring together diverse strands of research with a view to stimulating a future research agenda. Our own experiences as researchers and teachers have convinced us of the power of imagination in learning processes and it is our hope that this collection of papers will offer a forum for the sharing of ideas and promoting interest in what we believe to be a central aspect of the language learning experience.

Why now?

Perhaps the first question we need to address is why there has been so little research to date into the links between the imagination and learning. Drawing on the work of Kieran Egan, Garold Murray's paper in this collection discusses the "bad reputation" the imagination has had among educators. He explains how, set against the backdrop of frameworks which value rationality and objectivity, the imagination is perceived as not only inferior to rational, objective thought but also as a threat. In a world in which the primary function of education is the transmission of "objective" reality or knowledge, the intangible, subjective and emotionally laden imagination has been regarded as an unwelcome intruder in the classroom.

However, in recent years, both theoretical and empirical frameworks have become more open to understandings of how affect and subjectivity contribute to learning. In the field of foreign language education a good example of this development is Zoltán Dörnyei's L2 motivational self system (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009), a framework for understanding language learner motivation based around the motivational power of learner visions and mental imagery. Further, general interest in complexity perspectives within SLA has broadened the research agenda and has led to a greater awareness of the need for methodological innovation and a willingness to employ research methods from outside conventional paradigms in order to meet the challenges posed by complexity studies. Together these developments mean that researchers are now better equipped for the challenge of developing a more complete understanding of the role of the imagination in language learning.

The imagination and learning

A pioneering voice in raising awareness of the crucial role of the imagination in learning has been that of Kieran Egan. Over the years, Egan's lively writings have made a powerful case for regarding the imagination as more than an optional luxury for teachers to consider; instead, he positions the imagination as the "workhorse" of learning, an indispensable drive behind learning behaviours and motivation. In this collection of papers, he teams up with Gillian Judson to show how what they term *cognitive tools* or *learning toolkits* can be employed by learners to connect emotions, imagination and learning. Their contribution to this special issue suggests that we should not be discussing the mere possibility of a role for the imagination in education, but rather we need to be urgently considering whether we can afford to further ignore the negative impacts on learning that occur when we disregard it. As researchers at the forefront of imagination research in general education, their contribution here is invaluable in offering a fresh perspective on foreign language education from outside the world of second language education and research.

Theorizing the imagination in foreign language learning

Theories concerned with how the imagination relates to approaches to language learning have been so thin on the ground as to be virtually non-existent. However, recent developments in SLA have focused more notably on the role of factors such as affect, identity and self-realization in the language learning process, thereby moving imagination to the foreground. Perhaps the best known attempt to link the imagination to foreign language learning is Bon-

ny Norton's (Norton, 2001; Norton & Kamal, 2003; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007) adaptation of the concept of an imagined community. Norton—along with various colleagues—explored how feelings of membership or belonging to imagined communities may affect learners' motivation, investment or resistance to learning a language. However, Norton's concern has been very much with identity at a macro level, with issues such as ethnic or gendered identity, and little has been said about how the visions and mental imagery of individual learners in actual language classrooms impact on their learning behaviour.

Our interest in this collection is with the role of the imagination at the classroom level, with how individuals employ their imaginations when learning or teaching a foreign language. As discussed earlier, a key figure in introducing theories of the imagination to the field of foreign language education and research has been Zoltán Dörnyei. In this special issue, he and Christine Muir discuss a new concept they refer to as Directed Motivational Currents. These Directed Motivational Currents integrate several established theoretical strands to show how a powerful vision combined with a highly structured behavioural sequence may energize long-term, sustained learning behaviour. Their conceptualization of how learners make the transition from vision to action is one that is firmly grounded both in cutting-edge theories of psychology and the realities of the language classroom.

Researching the imagination

One possible reason for the dearth of research in SLA on the role of the imagination is the inherent, unique set of problems and challenges that researching the imagination poses. By definition, events occurring in the imaginations of individuals are not observable to the researcher; therefore, the capacity to research and understand them depends on a person's willingness and ability to self-report. Of course, self-reporting is an issue facing almost all research into learner psychology; however, researching the imagination can be especially problematic as the contents of our imaginations are often highly personal or private, making individuals reluctant to share them with others. These challenges require researchers to be creative and innovative in their approach to researching the imagination.

An interesting and highly pragmatic approach is that taken by Garold Murray, who revisits existing data and examines it through a new lens, with the aim of identifying pedagogical practices that may support the use of the imagination in foreign language learning. His article connects to and builds upon his previous work by identifying elements in the learning environment which appear to support the role of imagination in language learning. He makes a further

important contribution in linking research on imagination to actual classrooms by providing a valuable set of guidelines for pedagogical practice.

In her contribution, Letty Chan reports on a study which looked at how mental imagery was employed by PhD candidates in both their doctoral research and their L2 learning. One of the advantages of data obtained from such participants is that they have the maturity and sensitivity to reflect upon and articulate the mental images that they create and the ways in which they use them. Through her analysis of these data, Chan proposes a conceptual framework of types, functions, and conditions of imagery in academic and professional achievements. This framework systematically describes an intriguing array of imagery types, functions, and conditions, which shape the achievement of the individuals' goals. It marks an important step in imagination research in SLA by seeking to understand some of the factors involved in and typologies of imagination.

In a very different educational context, Ewa Guz and Małgorzata Tetiurka consider the role of the imagination for trainee teachers learning to teach young language learners. Their paper shows how imagination not only plays a vital role for learners, but is absolutely essential for empathetic and thoughtful teaching. Naturally, teachers see the world through adult eyes, yet in order to be effective educators, they need to create a mental image or concept of a young learner and "imagine" how these young learners see and experience the world. Such imagery then needs to be translated into pedagogical practices and behaviours in their interactions in the language classroom. In their study of pre-service teachers in Poland, Guz and Tetiurka identify key areas in which teachers may experience difficulty integrating their working images of the child's developmental characteristics with actual classroom practice. Their work is important in highlighting the role of imagination for teachers and particularly in the context of teacher training.

Future directions

In this special issue of *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, we have introduced a broad range of theoretical perspectives from general educational and SLA motivational theory, as well as research from a variety of educational settings, including PhD candidates in a British university, trainee teachers of young learners in Poland, and EFL learners in Japan. We believe that this diverse collection of papers reveals a healthy level of interest in the role of the imagination in language learning, but we also realize that this represents only the beginning. As Tammy Gregersen points out in her review of Zoltán Dörnyei and Magdalena Kubanyiova's *Motivating Learners, Motivating Teachers: Building the Vision in the Language Classroom*, efforts are now being made to connect theories of the imagination with actual teaching and learning, and both

teachers and researchers are keen to find out more. Our greatest hope as editors is that the thought-provoking papers in this special issue may inspire others to get involved in what promises to be a lively and exciting area of research.

Stephen Ryan
Senshu University, Japan
ryan@isc.senshu-u.ac.jp

Sarah Mercer
University of Graz, Austria
sarah.mercer@uni-graz.at

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